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JAMES
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GHOST
SHIP

A SIGMA FORCE SHORT STORY

Ghost Ship

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JAMES ROLLINS



WILLIAM MORROW IMPULSE
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Ghost Ship

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Now you don't see that every day . . .

From the vantage of his horse's saddle, Commander Gray Pierce watched the twelve-foot saltwater crocodile amble across the beach. A moment ago, it had appeared out of the rainforest and aimed for the neighboring sea, completely ignoring the trio of horses standing nearby.

Amused and awed, Gray studied its passage. Yellow fangs glinted in the morning sun; a thick-armored tail balanced its swaying bulk. Its presence was a reminder that the prehistoric past of this remote stretch of northern Australia was still very much alive. Even the rainforest behind them was the last vestige of a jungle that once stretched across the continent, a fragment dating back some 140 million years, all but untouched by the passage of time.

As the crocodile finally slipped into the waves and vanished, Seichan frowned at Gray from atop her own horse. "And *you* still want to go diving in those waters?"

The final member of their group—who was acting as their guide—dismissed her concern with a wave of a darkly tanned hand. "No worries. *That* particular salty bloke is a mere ankle biter. Quite small."

"Small?" Seichan lifted an eyebrow skeptically.

The Aussie grinned. "Some of the males can grow to be seven meters or more, topping off at over a thousand kilos."

He nudged his horse and led them across the beach. "But like I said, not much to fret about. Salties generally only kill two people a year."

Seichan cast a withering look at Gray, her emerald eyes flashing in the sunlight. She plainly did not want to fill that particular quota today. She tossed the length of her black ponytail over a shoulder in obvious irritation as she set off after their guide.

Gray watched her depart for a breath, appreciating the grace of her movements. The sight of her almond skin glistening in the sweltering heat drew him after her.

As he joined her, she glanced to the rainforest. "We could still turn back. Spend the day in the lodge's spa, like we'd planned."

Gray smiled at her. "What? After we came all this way?"

He wasn't just referring to the trail ride to reach this isolated stretch of beach.

For the past half year, the two of them had been slowly circumnavigating the globe, part of a sabbatical from their work with Sigma Force. They had been moving place to place with no itinerary in mind. After leaving D.C., they had spent a month in a medieval village in France, then flew on to Kenya, where they drifted from tent camp to tent camp, moving with the timeless flow of animal life found there. Eventually, they found themselves amid the teeming sprawl of Mumbai, India, enjoying humanity at its most riotous. Then over the past three weeks, they had driven across the breadth of Australia, starting in Perth to the east, traversing the dusty roads through the Outback, until finally reaching Port Douglas on Australia's tropical northeast coast.

Seichan nodded to their guide. "Who knows where this guy is really taking us?"

"I think we can trust him."

Though the two of them had been traveling the globe under false papers, Gray had never doubted that Sigma was covertly keeping track of their whereabouts. This became self-evident last night, when upon returning from a day hike into the Daintree Rainforest, they had stumbled upon a familiar figure holed up in their hotel's lounge, belting down a whiskey, trying to act inconspicuous.

Gray eyed the broad back of their rugged Aussie guide. The man's name was Benjamin Brust. The fifty-year-old Australian happened to be the stepfather of Sigma's young intelligence analyst, Jason Carter. The Aussie had also helped Sigma resolve a situation a year or so ago in Antarctica.

So to find the man seated in their hotel bar . . .

Ben had tried to dismiss the chance encounter as mere coincidence, quoting *Casablanca* at the time. "*Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world . . .*"

Gray hadn't bought it.

Ben had recognized this and simply shrugged it off, as if to say, *Okay, you caught me.*

From Ben's presence, Gray realized that Sigma's director must have leaned on former colleagues and associates to keep an eye on the pair during their half-year sojourn.

Accepting this reality, Gray hadn't pressed Ben on his subterfuge. Exposed and apparently apologetic for agreeing to spy on them, the man had offered to take them on a guided tour to a few of the region's highlights, spots known only to the locals.

Judging by the scuba gear they carried with them, Gray expected they were likely headed to some remote dive spot. Ben had refused to offer any further details, but from the mischievous gleam in his blue eyes, he had some surprise in store for them.

"We can tie the horses in the shade over there." Ben pointed an arm toward a tumble of rocks amid a copse of palm trees.

Gray leaned toward Seichan. "See, we're already here."

She grumbled under her breath, while maintaining a wary watch on the beach and forest. He recognized the tension in her back. Even after months on the road, she refused to let her guard down. He had come to accept it. Trained from a young age to be an assassin, she'd had paranoia and suspicion incorporated into her DNA.

In fact, Gray shared some of that same genetic code, courtesy of his stint with the Army Rangers and his years with Sigma Force, which operated under the auspices of DARPA, the Defense Department's research-and-development agency. Members of Sigma Force acted as covert field agents for DARPA, protecting the globe against various burgeoning

threats.

In such a line of work, paranoia was a survival skill.

Still . . .

“Let’s just try to enjoy this adventure,” Gray said.

Seichan shrugged. “A hot stone massage would’ve been enough of an adventure for me.”

They reached the tumble of boulders and dismounted. In short order, they had their horses secured.

Ben stretched a kink from his back with a rattling sigh, then pointed to a forested promontory jutting into the blue sea. “Welcome to Cape Tribulation. Where the rainforest meets the reef.”

“It is stunning,” Seichan admitted with some clear reluctance.

“Only place in the world where *two* UNESCO World Heritage Sites butt up against one another.” Ben pointed to the forest. “You got the Wet Tropics of Queensland over there.” He then squinted out to sea. “And the Great Barrier Reef stretching way out there.”

Seichan kicked off her sandals and wandered farther along the beach, her gaze taking in the sight of the jungle-shrouded cliffs tumbling into the crashing waves. Birdcalls echoed across the beach, while the perfume of the fragrant forest mixed with the bitter salt of the Coral Sea.

Gray stared appreciatively after her, which Ben noted.

“Quite the sight,” he said with a big grin. “You should put a ring on that finger before you lose your chance.”

Gray scowled at him and waved to the laden horses. “Let’s unpack our gear.”

As they worked, Gray nodded to the promontory. “How’d this place get the name Tribulation?” he asked. “Looks pretty damned peaceful to me.”

“Ah, you can blame that on the poor navigation skills of Captain James Cook. Back in the eighteenth century, he ran his ship aground on Endeavour Reef.” Ben pointed out to sea. “Tore out a section of the keel and almost lost his boat. Only through some desperate measures were they able to keep her afloat and manage repairs. Cook named the place Cape Tribulation, writing in his logbook *‘here begun all our troubles.’*”

"And not just for Captain Cook," Seichan called back to them, plainly overhearing Ben's explanation. She pointed down the beach, drawing both men toward her.

As Gray cleared the rock pile, he spotted a mound half buried in the sand and draped in strands of seaweed. A pale, outstretched arm rested atop the beach.

A body.

They hurried over. The dead man lay on his back, his eyes open and glazed. His legs were covered by wet sand but his exposed chest was striped with blackened marks, as if he'd been lashed with a flaming whip.

Ben dropped to his knees with a sharp curse. "Simon . . ."

Gray crinkled his brow. "You know this man?"

"He's the reason we're all here." Ben gazed out to sea, plainly searching the waters. "He was a biologist working for the Australian Research Council. Part of the Coral Reef Study. He was out here monitoring the spread of coral bleaching. It's knocked out two-thirds of the reef. A bloody international disaster. One Simon was trying to prevent from spreading."

Seichan frowned at the blackened stripes across his body. "What happened to him?"

Ben spat into the sand as he stood. "*Chironex fleckeri*."

"And that would be *what*?" Gray pressed.

"The Australian box jellyfish. One of the most venomous creatures on the planet. They're as big as basketballs with three-meter-long tentacles full of stinging cells. It's why we call them sea wasps. You get stung by one of those and you can die an agonizing death before you reach shore." Ben shook his head, continuing to stare out to sea. "They've multiplied like crazy since the bleaching, thriving on these oxygen-deprived waters."

Gray studied the ravaged body, noting the rictus of pain frozen on the dead man's face. Seichan gently picked up his outstretched hand, examining the pliability of the fingers. She glanced significantly at Gray.

At these warm temperatures, with his body baking in the sun, rigor mortis would have set in within four hours. Which meant he'd died recently.

"Makes no sense," Ben muttered as he stepped away, rubbing the stubble across his chin and cheek.

Gray followed him, hearing the worry behind his words. "What makes no sense?"

Ben waved to their gear spread over the sand. "It's why I hauled in full wet suits. While the seas around here might be plenty warm enough to go skinny-dipping in, you don't go diving in these waters without covering yourself up."

While unpacking the gear, Gray had noted the set of Ocean Reef Neptune masks, meant to cover a diver's face and head. They even had integrated comm units to allow them to communicate with each other underwater.

"Simon would've known better than to go swimming in these waters without proper protection." Ben gave another shake of his head. "Something's bloody wrong here. Where's his catamaran? Where are the others?"

"Others?" Gray asked.

"He was working with a small team from ANFOG." Ben noted his confusion. "The Australian National Facility for Ocean Gliders. They're a group of oceanographers that deploy underwater gliders, unmanned drones that patrol the reefs. The devices can continuously sample water, monitoring temperature, salinity, light levels."

"To help study the coral bleaching," Gray said.

"There were four scientists from the University of Western Australia aboard his boat, along with a graduate student." Ben glanced with concern at Gray. "Simon's daughter, Kelly."

Gray understood.

The others wouldn't have abandoned the dead man, especially his daughter.

Seichan joined him, her brows pinched with suspicion. "You said the dead man was the reason we're here. Why?"

"Simon knew I was up in the Queensland area. He wanted to see if I might help him solve a mystery. One suited to my particular skill set."

Gray frowned. "What skill set?"

"At mapping and traversing tricky cavern systems."

Gray knew the man's history. He was formerly with the Australian army, specializing in infiltration and extractions. He had been recruited from a military prison to help with an operation in Antarctica two decades ago, one involving an unexplored cavern system and a missing team of scientists.

“What did Simon want with your skills here?” Gray asked.

“Three days ago, one of the group’s gliders revealed the opening to an underwater cave, likely exposed from the cyclone that swept this coast last month.”

Seichan crossed her arms. “And he wanted you to help explore it. Why?”

“Because of what he found in the sand at its entrance. A set of old manacles and a half-buried ship’s bell. They recovered the objects and found a name inscribed on the bell. The *Trident*.”

Ben glanced between them to see if they recognized the name.

Gray shrugged.

“The *Trident* was a convict ship that transported prisoners from Great Britain to Australia. While docked in Melbourne in 1852, a group of prisoners teamed up with a handful of the ship’s mutinous crew. They commandeered the *Trident*, absconding with several crates of gold mined from the Victorian goldfields. After that, the ship vanished into history.”

“Until now,” Seichan commented drily.

Gray stared out at the promontory jutting into the sea. “Perhaps Captain Cook wasn’t the only one who had trouble navigating these waters.”

“That’s certainly true. You can find plenty of shipwrecks out there. Like the ruins of S.S. *Yongala* farther south. It sank during a cyclone a century ago.”

Seichan sighed. “So you brought us to the edge of a graveyard of ships.”

“I thought you might like to do a little treasure hunting with us. I never thought . . .” His words died away as he glanced at the remains of his friend.

“If this is truly foul play,” Gray said, “then someone else must have caught wind of Simon’s discovery. What else did your friend tell you?”

“Only to meet him here, and if he was delayed, to head to the coordinates of the glider’s discovery.”

Gray frowned. “And where is that?”

Ben pointed to the promontory of Cape Tribulation. “On the far side of that ridge.”

Before he could drop his arm, a sharp chatter of gunfire echoed from that direction. A startled flock of birds took flight from the forest near there.

Knowing what this implied, Gray cursed himself for leaving his satellite phone back in D.C., but the device was Sigma property.

“With no cell signal and no radio,” Gray said, “we have no way of alerting authorities.”

“So what do we do?” Ben asked.

Gray turned his back on the sea and stalked toward their gear. “We suit up and get to work.”

9:51 a.m.

As Seichan swam from the shallows to the deeper water, her body shed the dulling months of relaxation. With each stroke and kick, an icy coldness suffused her limbs. It sharpened her senses, honing her reflexes. The weeks of leisure faded into a dream, proving how illusory those months had been.

She settled into that cold center of her being. Her true nature was as coldblooded as any shark in these warm waters, predators that needed to keep moving to survive.

It was a lesson she knew all too well.

She followed behind Gray and Ben as they glided over the bright reefs. She studied Gray’s physique, the kick of muscular legs, the sweep of his arms. She remembered the glint in his eyes as he turned from the seas to prepare for this dive.

Like her, he was in his element.

After recent events back in the States, the two of them had attempted to flee, to vanish for a spell, to use the time to heal, to discover each other in new ways. And they had. But they both seemed to sense that such a sojourn could not last.

Not forever.

It wasn’t who they were.

She felt that even more keenly now.

Accepting this, she took in her surroundings. Life stirred all around her, as rich as the densest jungle. The trio whisked through a school of sleek black-and-silver barracuda,

scattering them like a flock of birds. Sea turtles hung motionless in the water, watching them pass with unblinking eyes, while gorgonian sea fans waved from ridges of hard coral. Elsewhere, eagle and manta rays glided out of their way with an unearthly elegance. For several yards, a googly-eyed grouper as large as a Volkswagen van paced alongside them before losing interest and lumbering away.

Across this wonderland, they slowly made their way along the promontory, intending to circle past its tip to reach the far side. Their only weapons were the element of surprise and one dive knife each. Seichan regretted their lack of firepower, especially after hearing those earlier rifle blasts.

“Slow up,” Ben radioed through their comm units.

As they bunched together, Seichan reached a gloved hand to the sandy bottom to steady herself. Before she could touch the seabed, Ben knocked her arm away.

“Watch yourself,” he warned.

The sand where she had been about to place her palm suddenly sprouted spines. A creature burst from beneath the silt—and swam away.

“Stonefish,” Ben explained. “Most venomous fish in the world. Get stung badly enough by those spines, you can die in seconds. Sometimes just from the sheer pain. Only safe place to grab them is by the tail.”

She retracted her hand to her chest.

I’ll pass.

“We’ve cleared the promontory,” Ben informed them, while checking a wrist GPS. “I’ll take the lead from here as we head back along the far side toward Simon’s coordinates.”

The coordinates of a dead man.

If that thought wasn’t ominous enough, the terrain around them quickly changed—from multicolored splendor to gray desert. They had reached a section of the bleached reef. Sea life appeared to have fled the desolation.

“My god . . .” Gray mumbled.

Ben explained as they worked back toward shore, using the distraction to temper the tension. “It’s not as hopeless as it appears. The bleached coral is still alive. It’s just been stressed by the higher temperatures to expel the symbiotic algae that give the reef its vibrant colors. If left unchecked, the coral

polyps will eventually die. But if the stressors can be eliminated in time, the reefs can return to life. Unfortunately, the Great Barrier Reef has suffered back-to-back bleaching events. If this continues, by some estimates, the entire reef could vanish in the next couple decades.”

“Solving that particular danger will have to wait for the moment,” Gray said, and pointed ahead.

Thirty yards away, two large shadows hovered above, linked to the seafloor by taut anchor cables. One boat had a single keel. The twin hulls of the other marked it as the scientific team’s catamaran.

Ben eyed the larger single-hulled craft. “Definitely unwanted company.”

Gray drew closer to him. “How far off are we from Simon’s coordinates to the sea cave?”

Ben pointed toward the promontory coastline. “Fifty meters farther along.”

Gray nodded and turned his attention toward the surface.

Seichan could guess the question plaguing him. With no knowledge of the situation above, they faced a troubling choice.

Which boat should they attempt to board first?

The answer was taken from them—suddenly and violently.

The dark shadows beneath the catamaran suddenly erupted with a fiery explosion. The ship lifted out of the water for a breath, then crashed back down. Its shattered hulls crumbled in on themselves, then slowly sank as the sea flooded its compartments.

Seichan shook her head, expelling a breath.

The concussion of the blast ached in her ears and chest.

If we’d been any closer . . .

Ben swore as he gaped at the sinking wreck.

Seichan spotted a body rising off the broken deck, trailing blood.

One of the oceanographers.

The earlier gunfire echoed in her head. She pictured the ravaged body of Ben’s friend. Whoever these pirates were, they had moved beyond executing their prisoners. They were cleaning house.

But what did that mean? Were any of the other scientists

still alive? And what about Simon's daughter?

Are we already too late?

Only one way to know for sure.

"Let's go," Gray said coldly.

10:10 a.m.

Gray hung in the shadow of the boat with Ben. The craft appeared to be an old fishing charter with a wide open rear deck, a small raised wheelhouse, and a cubby cabin beneath the bow.

He and Ben had taken up position under the steel dive deck at the stern. Across the length of the twenty-foot hull, Seichan hovered near the bow. She clutched one hand to the anchor cable. Over her head, the line rose out of the water and up to a bow roller and a winch. She would use the cable like a rope to board the boat from that side.

At the moment, they dared not even use their radios, fearing that in such close quarters the enemy might hear them. He couldn't risk losing their best weapon.

The element of surprise.

He rose up until his palm rested against the starboard side of the dive deck. Ben followed him, taking a position on the port side.

Once ready, he eyed Seichan—then sliced his free arm through the water.

They all moved at once.

Gray grabbed the edge of the dive deck and smoothly pulled himself out of the water and twisted around to land his backside on the steel. He kept his head below the stern rail. Ben mirrored his maneuver on the far side. With no alarm raised, they shifted to get their legs under them and freed their dive knives.

As he crouched, he heard low, furtive voices, one deep chuckle, and someone softly crying. All the sounds seemed to be coming from the open rear deck—but was anyone in the ship's wheelhouse or in the lower cabin?

Only one way to find out.

He waited for the right moment—and it came with a shout of surprise from the deck. Upon that signal, both he and Ben burst up and hurdled the stern rail. Across the boat, a figure stood exposed atop the bow deck.

While still underwater, Seichan had unzipped and stripped down the top half of her wetsuit. She stood now in her bikini top, leaning nonchalantly with her hips cocked, a hand leaning on the neighboring rail. With her bottom half still encased in her black wetsuit, she looked like a mermaid stranded atop the deck.

Her sudden appearance—along with her bored expression—momentarily baffled the two armed men guarding a pair of kneeling prisoners. Even before they could shift their weapons toward her, Gray came up behind and knifed the first man in the side of the throat. Ben was less lethal and clubbed his target with the hilt of his weapon, striking him expertly behind the left ear. Bone cracked, and the man crumpled limply to the deck.

Gray grabbed the Desert Eagle pistol carried by his target and focused on the empty wheelhouse, where a closed door led down to the cubby cabin. He collected the other weapon and tossed it to Seichan, who caught it one-handed.

She quickly crossed to the door to the cubby cabin, kicked it open, and surveilled the cramped space below. “All clear,” she called as she retreated to join them.

The two prisoners were a red-haired young man and a woman in her late forties.

Ben knelt before them as they stared wide-eyed and stunned at the sudden assault. “We’re friends of Simon,” he assured them. “I’m guessing you’re part of the ANFOG team working with him.”

The woman took a shuddering breath, wiped tears from her cheeks, and nodded.

“What happened here?” Gray asked.

The story unfolded in stuttering bits and pieces, told by the pair of survivors, Maggie and Wendell. Three hours ago, the assailants had pretended to be a fishing charter. The ruse lasted long enough for the armed men to assault the catamaran. Simon had tried to fight them, but he was overpowered, stripped, and tossed overboard.

“Why?” Ben asked. “Why not simply shoot him?”

Maggie looked near shock with the retelling. “They were trying to get his daughter to cooperate.”

“Kelly?”

She nodded. “Only Kelly knew the coordinates where the *Trident*’s artifacts had been found. We were all on a dive that day, leaving her, as our lowly student, aboard the ship to monitor a routine glider survey. It’s mind-numbing work. While watching the feed, she happened to spot the bell and shackle. Excited, she free-dove down to collect the trophies. But when she recognized the name on the bell—and what such a discovery implied—she erased the glider’s record. Though she told us about the discovery, she kept its exact location secret.”

“But not from her father,” Ben added.

Wendell looked startled. “What?”

“Kelly told Simon,” Ben said. “Then he told me.”

Gray suspected Simon shared this information with Ben for selfish reasons. He likely wanted to recruit Ben before his daughter tried doing anything even more foolhardy, like attempting to search those caves on her own.

“Kelly eventually broke and told the gunmen the coordinates,” Maggie explained. “But before they could pull Simon out of the water . . .”

Ben grimaced. “He ran afoul of a box jelly.”

She nodded. “Kelly witnessed it all. That poor girl.”

“Where is she now?” Seichan asked.

The woman stared out toward the forested cliffs. “They forced her to go along with them. When she initially refused, they shot Tyler and threatened us.”

Gray pictured the dead man floating amid the wreckage. “How many went with her?”

“Six, including Dr. Hoffmeister.”

Ben frowned. “Dr. Hoffmeister?”

“Our team leader,” Wendell elaborated with a bitter scowl. “He was the one who betrayed us to those murderous bastards.”

Seichan snorted. “So much for the purity of scientific research.”

Maggie looked down. “We’d all heard rumors he had a

gambling problem, but I never imagined he could be so callous. Especially with those he worked alongside.”

Gray was not as surprised. All too often greed trumped friendship or loyalty.

“You have to do something,” Wendell said. “They’ll kill Kelly once they find what they’re looking for.”

Gray knew he was right. And from the despair in the kid’s voice, his interest in Kelly was more than merely collegial.

Seichan glanced toward the coast and shrugged. “Three against six. Not bad odds.”

“And we still have the element of surprise,” Ben added.

Gray began to nod when a crackling noise drew his attention to the dead assailant on the deck. The noise rose from a radio headpiece.

He quickly snatched it free and lifted the radio to his ear and lips. A trail of words reached him.

“ . . . late in reporting in. What’s your status?”

Gray had to take the chance. “All quiet here,” he said gruffly.

There was a long pause before the voice on the line returned, angry and suspicious. *“Who the hell is this?”*

Seichan stared at him as he lowered the radio.

He shook his head.

So much for the element of surprise.

10:25 a.m.

“Let’s give those blokes a wide berth,” Ben radioed to them.

Seichan didn’t argue as she followed the two men. A trio of bull sharks circled the wreck of the catamaran, likely drawn by the blood of the murdered oceanographer. Their group steered well clear of that wreckage and headed for the coast.

Earlier, before going overboard, they had briefly searched the guards for the boat’s keys but had no luck. They also found the ship’s radio disabled, requiring a digital code to unlock it. So as a precaution, they had ordered Maggie and Wendell to suit up and swim to shore, sending the pair out of harm’s way with instructions to get word to someone in

authority and let them know the situation.

Seichan knew better than to expect any help in time.

We're on our own.

Before leaving, Maggie had also informed them what they'd be facing. The crew had departed with spear guns and carried satchels of demolition charges.

Seichan glanced to the ruins of the catamaran, recognizing the handiwork of those explosives. The thieves plainly had come prepared in case they had to blow their way into that cavern system in order to search for the cache of gold.

She pictured the mutinous crew back in 1852 rowing into those same sea caves to hide their loot, perhaps fearing the *Trident* might be recaptured by British forces. But was the gold still here after so long?

As they neared Simon's coordinates, Ben waved for them to spread wider, making their group less of a target. They proceeded with great caution, using the ridges of reefs as cover. If the assailants suspected treachery after the aborted radio call, the enemy would likely have a guard hidden near the entrance to the cavern system. If any of their team flushed him out, the other two would still have a chance to take him down.

Unfortunately, once they drew closer to the coordinates, they realized the guard at the entrance was not what they expected. They almost missed it as the waters grew murkier, clouded by sand and silt stirred up by the waves crashing into the towering coastal cliffs.

Through the gloom, a yellow torpedo-shaped tube with fins hovered a couple yards in front of the black eye of a tunnel. Its nosecone pointed out toward the sea, its buoyant length gently bobbing in the current.

"One of ANFOG's gliders," Ben hissed.

The thieves must have left this electronic guard dog to watch the entrance to the cavern system. Someone was likely monitoring its feed from inside the sea caves.

"No way we can sneak past that glider's sensors," Ben said. "If we get too close, the enemy will know we're on our way inside."

"Then we find a way to blind it," Gray said.

"How?"

Gray reached to a webbed bag hanging from his weight belt. He pulled out one of the two demolition charges they had found aboard the boat during their search.

"If you try to blow the glider up," Ben warned, "it'll be as good as being spotted. They'll still know we're coming."

"That's not my plan."

Gray swam back several yards, then used his dive knife to remove three-quarters of the charge's load of plastic explosive, weakening its potential blast. He then quickly buried it a foot into the sand at the base of a ridge of bleached, brittle coral.

"Move well back." He waved them farther from the shoreline. "I set the timer for thirty seconds. Be ready to go on my mark."

With the charge buried, they retreated.

Seichan counted down in her head as she swam. When she reached zero, a muffled *whump* thudded into her ears and rib cage. She twisted back around as the section of the seabed where Gray had buried the charge belched upward with a massive flume of sand and shattered coral. The current immediately swept the cloud toward shore.

"Now!" Gray radioed. "Get into the debris field and stick close together."

Seichan understood. She swam with the others into the dense cloud of sediment. They quickly lost sight of one another, even when clutching an elbow or the edge of a neighbor's fin. Still, Ben guided them unerringly forward, swimming by instruments alone, following his wrist GPS. He skirted them to the side of the blinded electronic guard dog, then along the rocks.

Moments later, the Aussie was pulling them into the mouth of tunnel. Even from here, Seichan could not spot the glider through the stirred-up silt. It was as if the entire world had vanished beyond the tunnel.

Ben took her hand and drew her fingers to a length of rope staked along the seabed. It led deeper into the tunnel.

She understood.

Follow the line.

She set off behind Ben, with Gray behind her. She was soon grateful the enemy had left this path to follow. With each kick and paddle, their motion stirred up more silt in the tunnel.

Not only could she barely see Ben's fins ahead of her, but being weightless in her gear added to her disorientation. It was almost impossible to tell up from down.

Once far enough away from the glider's sensors, Ben risked switching on a pair of small lights flanking his mask. "Okay, I love caving and I love scuba diving, but when you combine the two into *cave diving*," he grouched, "it turns into bloody death sport. And even more so now."

Ben slowed and pointed to a blinking red light fixed to one side of the tunnel. It was one of the demolition charges. The enemy must be planning to blow the entrance on their way out once they secured the treasure.

As Seichan continued, following the staked line of rope, she oriented herself enough to realize the tunnel was less a passage drilled through solid rock than a winding, torturous path through and around a jumble of boulders and broken slabs.

"It's an old rock slide," Ben confirmed, scanning his lights around as he wriggled between two blocks of granite leaning against one another.

As Seichan followed, she sensed the precarious nature of this pile, suspecting it wouldn't take much of a blast to bring this all crashing down.

After another minute of kicking and squirming, Ben's voice dropped to a hissed whisper. "Got lights ahead."

He doused his own lamps and slowed to a crawl. The passage widened enough for the three to cluster together. The way opened directly ahead, illuminated by a figure floating weightless in scuba gear beyond the tunnel. The man's attention was on the glowing device he held in his hands. Its screen was as bright as a lamp in the dark waters.

Ben glanced significantly at them.

It must be the monitoring device and control unit for the glider outside.

Gray held up a palm, indicating the other two should hang back.

He then pushed off the tunnel floor and glided toward the man's back. Some warning eddy of current must have alerted his target.

The diver spun around, fumbling for his shouldered spear

gun—but Gray was already atop him.

He plunged his knife under the man's chin and clutched him with his other arm. The body writhed for several seconds, then went slack. Gray deflated the man's buoyancy vest and let his weighted form sink into the dark depths, but not before relieving him of his spear gun and glider's control unit.

Ben and Seichan joined Gray as he doused the device, returning the waters to a stygian darkness—or at least, it should have.

They all turned their faces upward.

Through the waters overhead, a soft, shimmering glow beckoned to them. The diffuse light gave dimension to the flooded cavern around them. It had to be half the size of a football stadium. The glow also revealed the surface of the lake inside here. It stretched about ten meters overhead.

They slowly rose toward the shine.

With great caution, they risked peeking the edges of their masks above the water.

Ben gasped next to her. "Holy Mother of God . . ."

10:42 a.m.

Gray understood the Aussie's stunned shock.

The roof of the cavern glowed with what appeared to be swaths of stars, shining in hues from a deep blue-green to a bright silver. The glow revealed long filaments hanging from the roof, each lined by rows of pearlescent droplets.

"Glowworms," Ben explained.

Gray had heard of caves in Australia and New Zealand that harbored these bioluminescent larvae, but he had never imagined they could produce such a brilliant display. There had to be millions glowing throughout here, attempting to lure prey with their shine into their sticky traps.

But the true wonder was not found across the roof.

The glowworms had found a more convenient purchase.

The wreck of the *Trident*.

The three-masted sailing ship listed crookedly in the cavern, having run aground into a sandbar on the far side. The entire

surface of the ship was draped in glowworms and their fine silk nets. It was as if the wreck of *Trident* had risen from ghostly seas, still draped in bioluminescent kelp and algae.

Despite the wonder of the sight, movement—both on the sandbar and atop the deck—drove Gray back underwater, drawing the others with him.

“Did you notice the ship’s sails were furled and tied?” Ben said as he joined Gray. “At one time, this cavern must’ve been open to the sea. The crew likely sought to shelter here during a storm. Maybe even hiding from a cyclone.”

Gray pictured the rockslide they had traversed to get here. “And in doing so, the bastards got themselves trapped here.”

“Let’s not suffer the same fate,” Seichan reminded them.

Gray nodded. “We need to find Simon’s daughter, secure her, and get the hell out of here.”

“I spotted a blond woman with the group on the sandbar,” Seichan said.

“That’d be Kelly,” Ben confirmed.

Gray set off toward shore. “Then let’s go get her.”

As they traversed the lake, they kept deep. The lakebed slowly rose up under them as they neared the far side. Even here, life thrived. Centuries-old coral fluttered with sea fans. Brightly colored fish darted from their path, while albino lobsters as long as his forearm stalked the reefs.

Seichan swam beside him, carefully eyeing the sand and rocks for threats. Something caught her eye, drawing her to the side.

Before he could inquire about her interest, they reached the *Trident*. From here, they would have to work swiftly. At any moment, someone might try to radio the man they had taken out earlier. Gray knew they had only a narrow window before their presence in the cavern was exposed.

Hidden in the shadow of the wreck’s hull, he worked quickly with the others, making sure everyone was prepared. Once satisfied, they set off again. They circled the bulk of the *Trident* and approached the sandbar, hugging the lakebed. Gray was counting on the gleam of the glowworms reflecting off the lake’s dark surface to keep their group hidden for as long as possible.

As they reached the shallows, Gray could make out figures atop the sand, not far from where the *Trident* had run aground. The ship loomed above the small group, revealing a huge crack in its hull. A trio of wooden chests stood nearby. From the drag marks in the sand, it appeared the boxes had been hauled from the ship's broken hold.

Gray didn't doubt what they contained.

The *Trident's* lost treasure.

Ignoring the wealth stored in those chests, he concentrated on the watery image of the three mercenaries standing guard over the treasure—and one lone girl.

Kelly knelt in the sand, her shoulders slumped, her face despondent.

One of the men had a pistol casually pointed at the back of her head, clearly awaiting the order to dispatch this witness. The other two were similarly armed. Their abandoned spear guns were propped on boulders behind them. It seemed the crew must have packed-in additional weapons in waterproof cases.

Gray cursed their preparedness, but there was nothing he could do about it. His team was committed now. He curled his body and got his legs under him. He glanced right and left to make sure the others were ready.

In his head, a countdown had been running, matching the timer he had set on the demolition charge. Moments ago, he'd attached his remaining device to the far side of the *Trident's* hull. He even added the leftover plastic explosive from the earlier charge.

As the countdown reached zero, he burst out of the water.

At the same time, the explosion rocked the cavern with a deafening blast. Water and broken planks flumed high into the air behind him.

Gray already had his stolen spear gun at his shoulder. He fixed his aim and squeezed the trigger. The steel spear shot through the air and struck the gunman looming over Kelly in the eye. The bolt pierced his skull and threw his body backward.

To his left, Seichan whipped her arm and deftly sent her dive knife flying from her fingertips. No one was deadlier with a blade than her. Her dagger impaled her target in his Adam's

apple, dropping him into a gurgling heap.

With a knife in hand, Ben barreled out of the water to Gray's right. He aimed for the third assailant, who stood closest to the water's edge. The enemy—stunned by the blast and the sudden attack—still managed to swing his pistol toward Ben.

Before he could fire, Kelly lunged up from the sand and knocked his arm high. The pistol cracked brightly, but the shot went wild. Ben crashed hard into the gunman, which threw off his attack. His initial knife jab was blocked by an elbow.

Still, Ben was not done.

With a hard shove, the Aussie sent his target stumbling backward—straight into one of the spear guns propped against a boulder behind the man. The impact drove the loaded bolt through his back and out his chest. The man sank to his rear, his mouth opening and closing, gasping like a beached fish, before he finally sagged and fell on his side.

Before anyone could speak, a thunderous groan drew all their attentions to the lake. In slow motion, the glowing bulk of the *Trident* tipped sideways, falling toward the water, collapsing on the side blown out by Gray's charge. Its masts shook and its deck canted.

"Look!" Kelly yelled.

Two figures—one thin-limbed and spry, the other bulky with muscle—leaped over the rails on the far side and dove toward the lake. They hit the water together and vanished into the dark depths. Gray imagined these last two men must've been scouring the *Trident* for any last treasures.

"No, no, no . . ." Kelly said.

Gray turned to her, noting the bright terror in her face.

"That was the leader of these bastards," she explained. "And Dr. Hoffmeister."

The traitor.

"They won't get far," Ben assured her. "We'll find them."

"No, you don't understand," Kelly said. "Hoffmeister has the transmitter for the demolition charges."

Gray understood. "He'll blow this place behind him once he's safely clear."

Ben pointed to where a few brighter lines of sunlight

pierced the glowing roof, marking the presence of cracks. "It could bring this whole place crashing down."

Knowing this to be true and with no time to spare, Gray stripped his body of nonessential weight, grabbed one of the spear guns, and sprinted into the water.

Seichan followed his example and dove alongside him.

They swam in tandem after the fleeing men. With the enemy already having a significant lead, it was likely a futile chase. Still, Gray refused to give up.

He glanced over to Seichan.

Behind her shoulders, the *Trident* sank into the depths, its bulk still aglow as it finally met its doom.

As he turned back around, something silvery flashed past his nose.

A spear.

The bolt shot between the two of them.

Ahead, a shadow rose from behind a ridge of a reef. It was the mercenary leader. He was already raising a second spear gun. Beyond the man, a small iota of light bobbed in the darkness.

Hoffmeister.

He was getting away.

10:55 a.m.

Seichan knew they had only one chance.

She lifted her spear gun with one arm and kicked hard. As she passed Gray, she shoved her free hand into his shoulder. "Go! I'll deal with this bastard."

Gray didn't hesitate or balk. It was one of the reasons she loved him. As exasperating as he could be at times, he trusted her fully. He did not suffer from some overinflated conceit of male bravado. Instead, they were a team. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses—and Gray was the better swimmer.

Proving this, he twisted to the side and swam off. He vanished almost immediately as he circled around the threat.

Seichan continued on a straight path.

She lifted her spear gun.
The enemy did the same.
Let's do this.

When only yards separated them, they both fired. Spears flashed through the dark waters. Seichan twisted to the side, but the bolt grazed the length of her thigh, slicing her wetsuit and leaving a line of fire down her leg.

Her aim was better. But at the last moment, the mercenary leader deflected the bolt with the steel butt of his gun, sending the spear careening to the side.

So be it.

She closed the distance between them. She had suspected all along this battle would end in a knife fight.

She reached for the sheath at her waist—but her fingers came up empty.

Cursing silently, she pictured the blade impaled in the throat of her target on the beach. In her haste to depart, she had never collected it.

Her enemy was not so ill prepared.
He bared a foot-long dagger.

10:58 a.m.

Across the lake, Gray continued his chase after the fleeing light. It was a beacon in the darkness and became his sole focus as he kicked and swept his arms. He used it to distract him from his worry about Seichan.

Slowly the luminous speck grew before him, offering both encouragement and hope. He still had his spear gun over one shoulder.

If I can get close enough . . .

Then suddenly the light vanished ahead of him, blinking out entirely. Caught by surprise, he momentarily slowed—then realized what the loss implied.

Hoffmeister had reached the tunnel.
I'm out of time.

11:01 a.m.

Unarmed, Seichan fled from her assailant.

Like Gray, she was practical. She knew her limitations and recognized the skill of her adversary. Her only hope was to keep ahead of his muscular bulk. With that goal in mind, she headed back toward the sandbar, following the path the team had used earlier.

Her brutal training as an assassin had taught her always to memorize her surroundings, to weigh every variable at hand.

So she headed unerringly along their prior path.

She pictured the dive knife abandoned on the sandbar.

It was a stupid lapse.

One I'll not make again.

But first she had to live.

She was already slowing, both from exhaustion and from the blood trailing from her sliced leg. It was becoming harder to kick with her wounded limb. Still, if nothing else, her injury drew her attacker onward, like a dog after a wounded bird.

A glance over her shoulder revealed the man was almost on top of her.

Good.

She slowed even further as she neared the location fixed in her mind's eye, a spot that had drawn her attention earlier on the way to the sandbar, enough to draw her away from Gray briefly.

She crested over a coral ridge and dove down to a stretch of bare sand.

She had noted a weapon here earlier.

One of those many variables.

With her gloved fingers, she reached for it—just as a shadow loomed over her.

Following Ben's warning from earlier in the day, she grabbed the weapon by its tail. She whipped around as the mercenary plunged his dagger toward her back. She easily avoided the strike, taking advantage of the man's overconfidence.

She swung and struck the stonefish into the man's neck. Spines pierced his flesh. Venom pumped. The effect was

instantaneous. His body stiffened. He dropped his dagger and pawed at his neck, knocking the impaled fish away—but the damage was done.

His body thrashed in the water. The pain so maddened him that he ripped off his mask and regulator. Fingernails clawed at his face. Then his limbs slackened, falling away leadenly. He hung in the water. His blind eyes stared back at her. She didn't know if the pain had killed him, or the poison, or if he'd simply drowned.

She knew only one certainty, picturing the ravaged body of Kelly's father.

Good riddance.

11:05 a.m.

Gray scrambled along the rope as it wound a serpentine course through the old rockslide. He hauled with arms and kicked off purchases with his feet. His shoulders remained hunched by his ears. At any moment, he expected the charges hidden along the passageway to explode, to send the pile crashing down atop him.

His only hope was that Hoffmeister would wait until he was well clear of the coastal cliffs before he risked using his transmitter. The oceanographer must know the blasts could cast off massive boulders that would pound into the water around him.

But would the panicked bastard be that cautious?

Gray grabbed the rope with both hands and yanked his body around another turn in the tunnel. As he continued, the line suddenly went slack. The next pull only drew the rope toward him.

Gray cursed, knowing what this meant.

Hoffmeister had cut the safety line.

Gray took care not to pull on the rope. He needed its draped length to lead him out of here. Still, the stirred-up silt made it hard to see the line. He had to proceed with greater care—which slowed him down considerably.

I'll never make it now.

But then, impossibly, a light appeared out of the murk ahead.

Daylight.

He hurried again, rushing the last of the distance. As he burst out of the tunnel, he found Hoffmeister only ten yards away. He was crouched low to the seabed.

Gray was shocked to find the man so near. He quickly hauled the spear gun from his shoulder.

Hoffmeister had nowhere to flee.

Gray was wrong.

From the seabed, a yellow torpedo shot upward, jetting away from the oceanographer.

It was the ANFOG glider.

Suddenly, Hoffmeister was torn off his feet. His body flew after the glider, dragged in its wake. The man had clipped and tethered himself to the glider by a length of cable. He plainly intended to escape using his own tool, likely manually setting the glider's motor to maximum power a moment ago.

Gray fired after his retreating form, but his shot didn't come close.

He even tried to swim after the bastard but quickly recognized the futility. In less than a minute, Hoffmeister would be far enough out into open water to use his detonator.

It's over.

But as Gray watched, the yellow torpedo suddenly made a sharp left turn, banking quickly. It rolled Hoffmeister like a ragdoll through the water.

Confused, Gray swam out farther to follow its trajectory.

The glider aimed for the wreck of the catamaran—and the frenzy of bull sharks drawn by the blood of Hoffmeister's murdered colleague. The oceanographer must have sensed the threat, even more so when the glider began to slow as it neared the wreckage.

Hoffmeister frantically tried to unclip his line from the glider before it dragged him into the sharks. As the torpedo decelerated, the oceanographer finally broke free and fought his way from the danger.

But sharks were not the only predators hunting these waters.

From the wreck below, a dark shape shot upward, jaws

impossibly wide. Yellow teeth clamped on Hoffmeister's left arm and shoulder. A thick armored tail whipped in a circle, sending the crocodile's half-ton mass into a wrenching spiral.

Hoffmeister's body went flying away—minus his entire left arm.

Still, the man lived. With blood pouring from his shoulder, he kicked and pawed with his one arm. Then a bull shark swept down, snatched him up, and with a whisk of its powerful tail, vanished into the sea.

Aghast, Gray retreated toward the sea tunnel. He glanced to the passageway. He suddenly suspected the source for the glider's deadly turn.

Hoffmeister wasn't the only one who knew how to operate the glider.

So did a certain lowly graduate student.

11:11 a.m.

Poor girl . . .

Seichan watched Kelly drop the glider's control unit to the sand. Gray had left the device here before diving into the waters after Hoffmeister. It was Ben who had suggested the girl use her past experience with the underwater drones to monitor the seas beyond the cave.

Little did the Aussie know how fortuitous such a suggestion would prove to be.

Kelly remained on her knees. Ben was beside her. He hooked an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his chest.

"Nicely done, Kelly . . . nicely done."

The only response from the girl was the shaking of her thin shoulders as she sobbed silently into Ben's chest. Though Kelly had exacted her revenge, it would not bring back her father.

Seichan stepped toward the water, leaving the girl to her mourning, knowing there were no words to ease that pain.

Instead, she stared up at the glowing stars, trying to find meaning. Long ago, greed had led a mutinous crew to a tragic end here in this cavern. And centuries later, it was greed

again that led to more bloodshed and death.

Were some places simply cursed?

She remembered Captain Cook's name for this corner of the world.

Cape Tribulation.

She shook her head.

Maybe this place wasn't cursed, but it had certainly lived up to that name.

7:56 p.m.

A low groan drew Gray's attention to the left. He lifted his face from the padded doughnut of the massage table and stared over at the source of the complaint.

Seichan lay on the neighboring table. She was naked, covered only by a modesty towel over her buttocks and a row of steaming stones along her spine. He stared at the line of Steri-Strips closing the shallow laceration down her upper thigh.

"You okay?"

"More than okay," she said with contented sigh. "Like I said earlier, this is more than enough of an adventure for me."

He grinned and settled back to his table.

A heated stone was gently placed on the center of his lower back.

It was his turn to groan.

He allowed himself to drift in the pleasure of the attention. Earlier, Ben had facilitated their escape from Cape Tribulation, keeping them out of the ensuing limelight. Ben had also promised to protect Kelly in the weeks ahead, determined that the recognition for the discovery of the *Trident* go to her and her father—along with the gold.

In turn, Kelly intended that the treasure be used to finance her father's passion.

Protecting the reefs.

It would be the perfect way to honor the man's sacrifice.

Seichan made another noise—this time more thoughtful.

He glanced over again. "What now?"

She rested her cheek on the table, staring back at him. "I was just thinking about where we should go next."

"Any ideas?"

"Somewhere that's still warm and tropical." She lifted her cheek, staring pointedly at him. "But *without* box jellyfish, saltwater crocodiles, or stonefish."

"Like where."

"I was thinking Hawaii . . . maybe Maui."

"Really? Aren't those islands too tame and boring for you?"

She shrugged. "I've never been there. And right about now, boring sounds perfect."

"Then a Hawaiian vacation it is." He settled his face back into his doughnut. "Surely nothing can go wrong there."

What's True, What's Not

At the end of my full-length novels, I love to spell out what's real and what's fiction in my stories. I thought I'd briefly do the same here.

CAPE TRIBULATION. I was lucky enough to spend some time in this area near Port Douglas in Queensland and always wanted to set a story here. It's truly a magical place, where the rainforest meets the Coral Sea. I also took a horseback ride to the beach featured in this story, where I watched a huge saltwater crocodile saunter across the sand and into the surf. While there, I also became enamored with the history of the region. The site was indeed named by Captain Cook after his fateful accident on the nearby reefs. So I thought it would be fun to tell a story of a ship that suffered a similar, if more tragic, fate.

THE TRIDENT. While the ship featured in this short story is purely fictional, I based its fateful tale on the histories of two real convict ships: the *Success* and the *Hive*. Their combined stories involved mutiny, gold, and lost shipwrecks. So I borrowed their tales for this adventure.

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF. As I was setting this story here, I couldn't help but mention the tragic bleaching that is currently affecting two-thirds of the reef's coral, covering a swath almost nine hundred miles long. The reef is home to many endangered species, along with four hundred types of coral and fifteen hundred species of fish. It's an invaluable habitat, one that three hundred million people rely on for food, employment, and livelihood. So let's not lose it.

ANFOG GLIDERS. Yep, those yellow research torpedoes are real . . . though I may have stretched their capabilities a bit. But not by much!

WHAT'S NEXT?

At this story's conclusion, Seichan makes a fateful decision to head to Hawaii, specifically Maui. Gray has, of course, cursed them by declaring *nothing can go wrong*. Their sabbatical from Sigma Force is about to come to a crashing end—and nothing will ever be the same for the two of them. Already forces are in motion, fueled by an ancient horror known only as the Demon Crown. So hold tight, and I hope you enjoy the wild ride to come!

The Demon Crown

Keep reading for a sneak peek at the next Sigma
Force adventure

The Demon Crown

Coming in 2017 from William Morrow

Prologue

11:07 a.m. CET December 31, 1903
Genoa, Italy

With time weighing heavily upon its passengers, the carriage climbed recklessly up from the snow-swept city of Genoa. It jolted hard around a sharp twist in the narrow street.

Seated in the back, Alexander Graham Bell groaned. He was still recuperating from a fever following the transatlantic voyage with his wife. To make matters worse, upon arriving in Italy two weeks ago, nothing had gone smoothly. At every turn, Italian authorities thwarted his plans to secure the remains of James Smithson, the man who had founded the Smithsonian Institution. To facilitate this bit of grave-robbing, he had been forced to act as both spy and ambassador, doling out bribes and deceit in equal measure. It was a game for a much younger fellow, not a man in his mid-fifties. The stress had taken its toll.

His wife clutched his wrist. "Alec, perhaps we should ask the driver to slow down."

He patted her hand. "No, Mabel, the weather is turning. And the French are breathing hotly down our necks. It's now or never."

Three days ago, just as he had secured all the proper permits, some distant French relatives of Smithson had wormed out of the woodwork to stake a claim on his body, little knowing what truly was at stake. Before this French roadblock could become entrenched, he had argued with

Italian authorities that since Smithson had left the *entirety* of his estate to the United States, such an endowment must surely encompass his very body. He solidified his position with fistfuls of lira plied into the right hands, while at the same time categorically declaring—falsely—that President Theodore Roosevelt supported his mission.

Though he had prevailed in this subterfuge, he could not count on it lasting much longer.

It's indeed now or never.

He placed a palm over his breast pocket, where a fragment of paper was folded, its edges still charred.

Mabel noted his hand. “Do you believe it could still be there? In his grave, buried with his body?”

“We have to be sure. Someone came close to destroying this secret half a century ago. We can’t let the Italians finish the job.”

In 1829, James Smithson was buried by his nephew in a small cemetery atop a seaside promontory in Genoa. At the time, the graveyard was owned by the British, but the Italians had retained a claim to the ground beneath it. Over the past few years, a neighboring quarry had been slowly eating its way through this hill, and now the company wanted to take it all down, including the cemetery.

Upon learning of the threat to the bones of the founder of the Smithsonian, the museum’s board of regents had debated whether to rescue those remains before they were blasted into the sea. It was during that time that an old letter came into Alexander’s possession. It was written by the Smithsonian Institution’s first secretary, Joseph Henry, the man who oversaw the building of the Castle and who would eventually die within its walls.

“Henry was no fool,” he mumbled to himself, stroking his thick beard.

“I know how much you admired him,” Mabel consoled. “And valued his friendship.”

He nodded.

Enough to follow his instructions to this gravesite in Italy.

In the letter written the year before his death, Henry told a tale that traced back to the Civil War, when the tides were turning against the South. Henry had come upon a strange

notation in one of Smithson's old diaries. He only stumbled upon it because he had been seeking additional documentation concerning Smithson's endowment, trying to discern *why* the man was so generous to a country he had never even visited. During that inquiry, he came across a single exception to the estate, something *not* bequeathed to the United States. While the man's entire mineral collection—his lifetime work—was preserved at the Castle, one artifact was held back. It was an object that Smithson ordered his nephew to bury with his body upon his death.

The oddity drew Henry's interest, enough for him to diligently search the man's journals and diaries. He eventually found one reference to it, to something Smithson called *The Demon Crown*. Smithson expressed regret at unearthing it during a trip to a salt mine near the Baltic Sea. He claimed it could free something horrific.

"The very hordes of Hell upon this World . . ." Alexander whispered, quoting from a page of Smithson's diary.

"Do you truly believe that's possible?" Mabel asked.

"Somebody believed it enough during the Civil War to try to burn the Smithsonian to the ground."

Or so Henry had thought.

Upon discovering Smithson's secret, Henry had discussed it with some fellow board members, even wondering aloud if this artifact might be used as some form of weapon. Then three days later, the mysterious fire broke out at the Castle, which seemed to specifically target Smithson's heritage, both his papers and his mineral collection.

From the timing of this act, Henry suspected someone at the Smithsonian had betrayed his fears to the Confederacy. Luckily, Henry had kept Smithson's journal that referenced the artifact in his own office, so it had been spared the worst of the flames, though the cover was charred and sections lost. Still, Henry decided it best to keep this recovery secret, informing only a trusted circle of allies. The group formed a secret cabal within the museum, and over the passing years, they were entrusted with the Smithsonian's darkest secrets, information often kept even from the president.

One example of that was the mysterious symbol discovered

tattooed upon the wrist of a scoundrel whom Henry finally connected to the fire. The man died before he could be questioned, slicing his own throat with a dagger. Henry had sketched a copy of that symbol in his letter, serving as a warning for future generations.



It looked like a variant of the masonic symbol, but no one knew what group this particular incarnation represented. Decades later, when Smithson's grave was threatened, Henry's group approached Alexander and showed him Henry's letter. They recruited him to their cause, knowing it would take someone of his prominence and notoriety to pull off this bit of skullduggery on Italian soil.

Though Alexander was not sure what he would find—if anything—in Smithson's grave, he had agreed to undertake this task, even using his own money to finance the mission. No matter the outcome, he couldn't refuse.

I owe it to Henry.

The carriage bumped around the last turn and reached the summit of the promontory. The vantage offered a wide view across Genoa to its harbor, which was crowded with coal-laden winter barges, so many that it looked as if you could cross the bay by hopping from one to the other. Closer at

hand, the small cemetery beckoned, surrounded by white walls crowned with shards of broken glass.

“Are we too late?” Mabel asked.

He understood her concern. A corner of the cemetery was already gone, tumbled away into the neighboring marble quarry. As Alexander climbed out of the carriage into the bitter wind, he spotted what could only be a pair of coffins shattered below. He shivered, but it was not from the cold.

“Let us be quick,” he warned.

He led his wife through the cemetery gate. Ahead, he spotted a clutch of men huddled in thick coats. The party consisted of a few government lackeys and a trio of laborers. They gathered near a prominent sarcophagus cordoned off by a spiked iron fence. Alexander hurried over, bending against the wind, one arm around his wife.

He nodded to the American consul in attendance, William Bishop.

Bishop stepped closer and tapped his watch. “I heard a French lawyer is on a train from Paris. We should be prompt here.”

“Agreed. The sooner we’re aboard the *Princess Irene* with the bones of our esteemed colleague and headed back to America, all the better.”

As snow began to fall, Alexander stepped toward the gravesite. A gray marble pedestal bore a simple inscription.

*Sacred
to the
Memory
of
James Smithson, ESQ
Fellow of the Royal Society
London
who died at Genoa
the 26th June 1829.
aged 75 Years.*

Bishop crossed to one of the Italian representatives and spoke briefly. In short order, two of the laborers set about using crowbars. They cracked the seal on the tomb's marble lid and lifted it free. Nearby, the remaining worker readied a casket made of zinc. Once Smithson's bones were transferred into it, the box would be soldered shut for its transatlantic voyage.

As the men worked, Alexander stared again at the inscription, his frown deepening. "That's odd."

"What is?" Mabel asked.

"It states here that Smithson was seventy-five years old when he died."

"So?"

He shook his head. "Smithson was born June fifth, 1765. By my calculation, that means he was only sixty-four when he died. That inscription is wrong by eleven years."

"Is that significant?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea, but I imagine his nephew would have known his uncle's true age, especially as he was

setting it into stone here.”

Bishop waved Alexander closer to the tomb as the sarcophagus’s lid was finally carried off. “Perhaps you should do the honor.”

While he appreciated the gesture, he considered balking, but he had already come too far to turn back now.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

He joined Bishop before the open tomb and peered inside. The wooden casket inside had long rotted away, leaving a blanket of heavy dust over what was clearly a set of bones. He reached reverently inside, parted the debris, and lifted the skull, which was surprisingly intact. He almost expected it to crumble as he gripped it.

Stepping back, he stared into the eye sockets of the Smithsonian’s founder.

As stated on the inscription, Smithson was an esteemed fellow of the British Royal Society, one of the world’s most distinguished scientific groups. In fact, the man was tapped to join this society the same year he graduated from college. Even at such a young age, his scientific talent had been well regarded. Afterward, as a chemist and a mineralogist, he spent much of his life traveling throughout Europe collecting mineral and ore samples.

Yet, so much remained unknown about the man.

Like why he left his fortune and collection to the United States?

Still, one fact was indisputable.

“We owe you so much,” Alexander murmured to the skull. “It was your generosity of spirit that changed forever our young country. It was your legacy that taught America’s greatest minds to set aside petty ambitions and work together for the collective good.”

“Well spoken,” Bishop said, holding out his gloved palms. The weather was growing harsher by the minute, and the consul clearly wanted this matter finished.

Alexander didn’t argue. He handed over the skull so it could be transferred to the zinc casket and returned his attention to the tomb. He had already noted a rectangular shape in one corner.

Reaching in again, he waved away the dust to reveal a

small metal chest.

Could this be the source of such consternation?

It took all his strength to lift the box out of the tomb. It was dreadfully heavy. He hauled it aside and balanced it atop a nearby gravestone. Bishop ordered the workers to finish transferring the bones, then returned to his side, as did Mabel.

"It that it?" his wife asked.

Alexander turned to Bishop. "Let me remind you again. There is to be no official or unofficial mention of this object. Is that understood?"

Bishop nodded and glanced to the rest of the party, who were busy at work. "You've paid well for their silence."

Satisfied, Alexander unlatched and opened the lid of the chest. Inside, a bed of sand cradled something the size and color of a pumpkin. He stared at it breathlessly for a moment.

"What is it?" Mabel asked.

"It . . . it appears to be a chunk of amber."

"Amber?" Bishop's voice held a note of avarice. "Is it valuable?"

"Somewhat. Though nothing exceptional. It's basically fossilized tree sap." Frowning, he leaned closer. "Bishop, would you ask that worker if we could borrow his lantern?"

"Why—?"

"Just do it, man. We don't have all day."

Bishop rushed over.

Mabel stood at his shoulder. "What do you think, Alec?"

"I can make something out. Through the amber. But just barely."

Bishop returned, lantern in hand.

Alexander took it, twisted the flame brighter, and brought it close to the translucent chunk of amber. It glowed a rich honey, revealing what it hid at its heart.

Mabel gasped. "Are those bones?"

"I believe so."

It seemed Smithson's tomb held more than just his own moldering remains.

"But what are they?" Bishop asked.

"No idea. But surely something prehistoric."

He leaned closer, squinting. At the heart of the amber rested a small, fist-size triangular skull bearing a prominent row of

sharp teeth. It looked distinctly reptilian, maybe those of a small dinosaur. A halo of smaller bones floated within the glowing stone. He pictured ancient tree sap flowing over this creature's old grave, stirring up its bones and forever trapping them in this position.

The tinier bones had come to form a ghastly halo above the skull.

Like a crown.

He glanced to Mabel, who took a deep breath as she recognized the pattern. She knew, too, that this must be what Smithson wrote about—what he aptly named the Demon Crown.

"Impossible," his wife whispered.

He nodded. In his pocket, he held a burned page from Smithson's diary, upon which the man had scribbled a remarkable claim about this artifact.

It had to be *impossible*, as his wife said.

He pictured Smithson's words, what the dead man had written concerning this artifact.

Be warned, what the Demon Crown holds is very much alive . . .

Alexander felt an icy trickle of terror.

. . . and ready to unleash the very hordes of Hell upon this world.

8:34 p.m. EDT November 3, 1944

Washington, D.C.

"Careful of the rats," James Reardon warned at the entrance door to the tunnel. "Some real bruisers down here in the dark. One bit off the end of a worker's thumb last month."

Archibald MacLeish suppressed a shudder of disgust as he hung his jacket on a hook next to the door. He wasn't exactly outfitted for an excursion underground, but he had been late getting here, as an evening meeting at the Library of Congress had run long.

He stared down the five steps that led to the old subterranean tunnel connecting the Smithsonian Castle to its

neighbor across the mall. The newer museum, the Natural History Building, was completed in 1910, when ten million objects had been ferried by horse-drawn cart from the Castle to their present home. For a decade afterward, the two buildings had shared utilities via this seven-hundred-foot-long tunnel, but with later modernizations, the passageway was eventually closed off and seldom tread, except by the occasional maintenance crew.

And apparently some overgrown vermin.

Nevertheless, Archibald had believed there might be a new use for this abandoned tunnel. As the current Librarian of Congress and head of the Committee for the Conservation of Cultural Resources, he had been tasked to secure the nation's treasures at the start of World War II. Fearing bombing raids like those that had beset London during the Blitz, he had personally overseen the shipment of priceless documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, even a copy of the Gutenberg Bible—to the safety of Fort Knox. Likewise, the National Gallery of Art had transferred their most prized masterpieces to the Biltmore House in North Carolina, while the Smithsonian had buried the Star-Spangled Banner deep in Shenandoah National Park.

Still, Archibald had hated the piecemeal approach to these important efforts. Indeed, back in 1940, he had advocated for building a bomb-proof shelter beneath the National Mall as a more permanent solution. Unfortunately, Congress had shot down his idea due to the expense.

Despite this setback, Archibald had never given up on his idea—which was why he found himself in the basement levels of the Smithsonian Castle, where temporary bomb shelters had been secured for museum personnel. Three weeks ago, Archibald had hired a pair of engineers to conduct a feasibility study, to explore if such a vault could be constructed in secret, branching off this very tunnel. Then two days ago, during their surveys, the pair had discovered a side door in the tunnel, halfway across the Mall. It was hidden behind some pipes and bricked over.

Archibald had immediately informed James Reardon, the current undersecretary of the Smithsonian. As a longtime friend, James had supported Archibald's efforts for the

construction of a bombproof vault. The pair hoped that this discovery might stoke a renewed interest in the shelter, especially considering *who* had apparently hidden this room. His name was found inscribed on a plaque affixed to the steel door after its layer of bricks had been removed.

Alexander Graham Bell.

The notice came with a warning.

What lies beyond this door is both a wonder and a danger like no other. It could alter the course of mankind forever, or in the wrong hands, it could equally doom us all. We the undersigned deem this artifact too treacherous to come to light, but we dare not destroy it—for at its heart lies the possible key to life beyond death.

It was a remarkable claim, but the message was supported by the signatures of five regents of the Smithsonian board. James had verified the names. They were all deceased now, and no other record could be found concerning the circumstances that led Bell and these five to secure something beneath the National Mall, not to mention keeping such an effort from the other regents at the time.

Respecting that level of secrecy, Archibald had limited the knowledge of the door's discovery to only his friend James. The two engineers had been sworn to secrecy and now waited below, ready to break the lock and see for themselves what required such subterfuge almost four decades ago.

"We should hurry," James said, checking his pocket watch.

Archibald understood. They were already running an hour behind schedule due to his tardiness in getting here. "Lead the way."

James ducked through the door and down the steps. He moved spryly, while it took Archibald more time to maneuver the steep, narrow stairway. Then again, James was fifteen years younger and spent more time on his feet doing fieldwork as a geologist. Archibald was a fifty-four-year-old poet who had been coerced by FDR into taking a desk job—or as Archibald had described this assignment at the time, *the president decided I wanted to be Librarian of Congress*.

He entered the dank tunnel. The way ahead was lit by a

string of caged electrical bulbs running along the low roof. Several were broken or missing, leaving long gaps of darkness.

James clicked on a thick flashlight and set off down the tunnel.

Archibald followed. Though the passageway was tall enough for him to walk upright, he kept his back hunched and his head low, well away from the run of dark pipes along the ceiling. Especially upon hearing the occasional sound of nails scratching and bodies scurrying up there.

After a few minutes, James suddenly stopped.

Archibald almost bumped into him. "What's wr—?"

A series of sharp *cracks* echoed from the passageway ahead.

James glanced back, his eyebrows bunched together with concern. "Gunfire." He doused his flashlight and freed a Smith & Wesson pistol from a holster under his work jacket. Archibald hadn't known the man was armed, but considering the size of the vermin down here, the presence of the weapon made sense.

"Go back." James passed him his flashlight, then cupped both hands around the grip of his weapon. "Get help."

"From where? The Castle's deserted at this hour. By the time I raise an alarm, it'll be too late." Archibald lofted the long-handled flashlight like a club. "We go together."

A muffled explosion decided the matter.

James grimaced and headed forward, keeping close to one wall and staying in the shadows as much as possible. Archibald followed his example.

Within a few steps, a cloud of dust rolled over them, blown forth by the blast. Archibald fought against coughing, but the air quickly cleared. The same couldn't be said for the passageway. A smattering of dark forms sped across the floor and along the pipes.

Rats . . . hundreds of them.

Archibald had to stifle back a scream as he flattened along one wall. Something dropped from overhead, landed on his shoulder, and bounded away with a sharp squeak. Other bodies pattered over his shoes. A few scabbled up his pant legs as if he were a tree in a flood-swept river.

Ahead, James seemed unfazed and continued on, oblivious to the squirming bodies underfoot.

Gritting his teeth, Archibald waited until the worst of the horde fled past him, then hurried to catch up.

As the two reached a dark stretch of broken bulbs, a glow appeared ahead, marking a pair of lanterns resting on the floor. The pool of light revealed a body.

One of the engineers.

Other shadowy shapes stepped into view, appearing from the left.

Three masked men.

James dropped to a knee and immediately fired. The loud blast made Archibald jump, deafening him in turn.

One of the intruders spun and struck the wall.

James gained his feet and fired again, running forward. Archibald froze a breath, then gave chase, too. In the tumult that followed, lit by the camera-bulb flashes of gunfire, he watched one of the masked men try to haul his wounded companion to his feet, but James refused to relent, squeezing his trigger over and over again as he ran. Rounds sparked off the nearby pipes and concrete walls.

The third intruder fled down the tunnel with a heavy satchel in one hand, blindly returning fire over his shoulder. The shots went wild as the man was plainly more intent on escaping. His companion finally followed, forced by James's barrage to abandon the slumped form on the ground.

As James and Archibald closed the distance, another explosion knocked them both back. Flames blasted out an open doorway to the left and washed into the tunnel.

Archibald shielded his face with an arm.

As the fire guttered out, James led the way again.

Archibald quickly took in the damage as they reached the doorway. The engineer who lay crumpled at the threshold had been shot in the back of the head. The other was dead in the neighboring room, his clothes on fire from the blast. More flames raged at the rear of the small concrete chamber, turning it into a furnace, fueled by a burning bookshelf and the tomes that once rested there. Fiery pages still floated in the air, drifting through the smoke-choked air.

Nearby, James checked the assailant slumped on the ground. He swatted at the man's burning clothes, then set about searching his body.

Archibald kept his full attention on the neighboring room. A waist-high marble plinth stood in the center. A small metal chest lay toppled and open at its foot, likely blown off its pedestal by the blast. The box appeared to be empty, except for a pile of sand that had spilled out as it struck the floor.

He pictured the heavy satchel in the hands of the fleeing thief. With a sinking heart, he knew that whatever Bell and his cohorts had hidden here was gone. Still, he lifted his arm over his mouth and nose and ducked into that wall of heat, drawn by something he spotted poking out of the sand.

He stepped around the dead engineer to reach the chest. Dropping to a crouch, he grabbed what was exposed and pulled it free. It appeared to be the remains of an old field notebook or journal. Its leather cover had been blackened by a fire far older than what raged here now. A quick flip revealed most of the pages were charred or missing—but not all.

He imagined the thieves must have failed to spot the remains of this old journal hidden in the sand at the bottom of the chest. Sensing some significance to this discovery, he retreated with his prize.

“Look at this,” James said as he returned to the tunnel.

James sat back on his heels. He had peeled away the thief’s woolen face mask.

Archibald took in the sight, shocked by what was revealed. “My god . . . it’s a woman.”

But that wasn’t the only surprise. The thief had black hair and wide cheekbones, and from the pinched squint to her dead eyes, there was little doubt to the figure’s heritage.

“She’s Japanese,” Archibald mumbled.

James nodded. “Likely a Jap spy. But this is what I wanted you to see.” He lifted her lifeless arm to reveal something tattooed on the thief’s inner wrist. “What do you make of this?”

Archibald leaned closer, frowning as he studied the mark.



“Any idea what this might mean?” James asked.

Archibald glanced back to the burning room. Its door lay crookedly to one side, blown off its hinges. The inscribed metal plaque glowed in the firelight, as if emphasizing the warning about what was once hidden here.

. . . *a danger like no other.*

“No,” Archibald said, “but for the sake of our nation—and maybe the world—we need to find out.”

About the Author

JAMES ROLLINS is the #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of international thrillers, which have been translated into more than forty languages. His Sigma series has been lauded as one of the “top crowd pleasers” (*New York Times*) and one of the “hottest summer reads” (*People Magazine*). He lives in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

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